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URANIUM: A FILM PRODUCED BY THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA - ANNOTATED VIEWS

Compiled by N. Dave
Elliot Lake Laboratory

July 1991

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13 pp

MINING RESEARCH LABORATORIES DIVISION REPORT MSL 91-92 (IR)

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URANIUM

A Film Produced by

The National Film Board of Canada

Annotated Views

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The views expressed in this report are those of the film maker and audience present at the screening of the film 'Uranium' in Elliot Lake, Ontario. The author assumes no responsibility for the accuracy or authenticity of the views expressed.

URANIUM

A Film Produced by the National Film Board of Canada

The screening of the above film took place in Elliot Lake, Ontario, on 10 November, 1990 at 7:00 pm. The film was followed by a panel discussion. The panelists were:

1. Dr. David Pearson, Moderator, Assistant Director, Ontario Science North.
2. Esther Jaco, Lands Manager, Whitefish River First Nation, Birch Island, Ontario.
3. Magnus Isaacson, Director, Uranium.
4. Murray Duncan, AECB, Radiation Protection Bureau.
5. Homer Seguin, United Steelworkers of America.

The film and panelists were introduced by Ms. Linda Hyle of the National Film Board. The screening was well attended with standing room only, and the audience represented all walks of life including business, Retirement Living, first Canadians, researchers, regulators, educators and students.

FILM

The film presented negative views of uranium mining and waste management and how it has destroyed the environment and the life style of the Native people by the white man. It failed to show a balanced view of mining and environmental measures as practised today. It equated uranium mining to the atomic bomb, and damage to the environment from that of harmful chemicals and radiation. The blasting of an open pit was followed by a mushroom cloud footage for comparison. It presented views of Native people, United Steelworkers of America, a local farmer, a medical doctor, mine management from Saskatchewan and anti-nuclear groups. Elliot Lake mining management, regulatory bodies and Federal research organizations were not represented in the film. Footage of the film and interviews conducted at the CANMET Laboratory, Elliot Lake were not included in the film. The film showed

devastated vegetation near a tailings area but did not show successfully reclaimed and properly managed waste management areas.

DISCUSSION

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

1. Mr. Fergus Kerr, Vice President, Elliot Lake Operations, Denison Mines Ltd.

The film represented one-sided, negative, anti-nuclear propaganda by the National Film Board at the expense of taxpayers money. It was fifteen years out of date and an insult to our industry and town. Facts were absent in the film, e.g., Serpent River is clean and supports fish habitat. Water quality in the Serpent River is no different from other Ontario rivers, no radioactivity is discharged to the Serpent River watershed, and no contaminants were detected in moose in an AECB study in 1985. The film researchers and directors did not do their homework even at the high school level and did not care to look at the information available at our local library.

2. Ms. Lorraine Rekman, (former reporter with the Elliot Lake Standard).

The film was fine and people have to decide their own bias. It was surprising that the Elliot Lake footage was entirely from the air, why? Did the local mines not cooperate? The environmental footage showed ugly scenes.

3. Dr. Jack Long, Medical practitioner, Elliot Lake.

The film was interesting propaganda, but one-sided. It showed uranium mining activities as aspects of war, atomic bombs, but did not show that fire bombs also kill. Will someone please explain what the effects of radiation are? The people interviewed were smoking and have massive obesity; both have high risk of death.

4. A miner, (interjected)

Dr. Long, you have never worked underground, what do you know about breathing radioactive dust eight hours a day every day? Look here, I have a hole in my ear - cancer.

5. Dr. Denis Prodan (Elliot Lake Veterinarian)

Congratulations on the greatest failure. The director has twisted the truth. You are polluting the minds of our children with lies, which is worse than the pollution in the river. My father died of cancer from the Nuclear Industry but the pollution has been abated now. You are causing bad publicity for the town of Elliot Lake in these difficult times at the taxpayer's expense.

RESPONSES FROM PANEL

M. Isaacson

The film is a point of view documentary to raise issues and start debates, but is not like the six o'clock news. The facts presented were checked and researched. Many things representing different views are not said in the film but will be documented in booklet form which will be available soon.

The mines in Elliot Lake had refused permission to film on their property.

Esther Jaco

From the viewpoint of the Native people, truth was portrayed in the film. It is not an outdated film for the Native people because our lives have not changed. The film addresses a long standing pollution problem in the Elliot Lake Serpent River basin. How will you feel when you pull out fish which are twisted and deformed in the North Channel? The film represents realistic views of the Native people. It is timely for the Indian people that their concerns are addressed.

H. Seguin

I came to Elliot Lake to raise the issues of health and safety of our workers in the underground working environment of uranium mines and get a handle on the environment itself. At that time Stanrock and Quirke tailings were areas of devastation. Even AECB's own studies showed uptake of

radionuclides in blueberries. The entire Serpent River was devastated. AECB has been a disaster for being both a regulatory and a Government agency. There are 400 radiation victims from uranium mines in Elliot Lake. Now the place is safe but the film is accurate. Serpent River harbour is the single largest source of radionuclides in the world. The film, however, failed to show the improvements. In northern Saskatchewan there have been 100 spills but the companies are only fined $10,000. I will work to improve things but the law stinks. We, however, have better conditions now. Elliot Lake has the safest uranium mines in the world but they are closing now and new high grade mines are opening in Saskatchewan. The film failed to compare coal mines, black lungs and the associated damage to the environment. We should produce nuclear energy in the safest possible manner rather than just for profits. There have been environmental disasters elsewhere too. AECB legislates with regulations dating back in the 1950's.

M. Duncan

Union and companies were strongly involved in the improvement of Elliot Lake mines but it was really a tripartite effort. The film endorsed views of the maker, AECB was not invited or consulted. Uranium is mined not for bombs but for peaceful uses. There is no reliable evidence of health effects on the public in general, except that on the miner. But things have improved a lot now compared to past practices. In Canada, only 2% of mine tailings are from uranium mines. There is a mess from other tailings as well. We have studied the evidence of childhood leukaemia and it is not high, also moose meat shows no contaminants. The hazards of uranium mining are well recognized. All AECB and regulatory standards apply to all uranium mines equally and for all people. The film did not show the improvements and peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

QUESTIONS

6. Floor

The film is so biased it did not care to show the true and other side of the story, pollution, for example, also applies to the car industry. If Henry Ford had known about the pollution his cars would cause, he would have shelved his plans for cars. Government money is being used for propaganda and the booklet showing the other side is not even out yet. In the meantime, the film has already been screened in fourteen places. The National Film Board should come out with the other side of the story showing peaceful uses of nuclear power, the benefits of nuclear medicine and improvements in the environment.

PANEL

M. Isaacson

The Canadian Nuclear Association (CNA) puts multi-million dollar advertisements and articles in favour of the nuclear industry but does not talk about tailings. This film provides the other side of the story as it affects the Natives and farmers for example. Our society is wasteful of energy and we should go for sustainable development.

H. Seguin

In 1974, Ra-226 levels were high in drinking water for the Native people but not for the White man on the other side of the river, and nothing was done, even by 1978. All fault lies with the government. No level of radioactivity is safe, but the government did nothing for the Natives. It has been a disaster and I have the facts. Even in 1977 the radiation exposure levels should have been 50 mSv (ICRP regulations) but the people are getting more than 50 mSv today. Our government is not a responsible government; it takes them too long to legislate. Our laws are ridiculous and the AECB is the worst enemy, but you cannot shut us up.

M. Duncan

Changes are occurring and companies are complying. It is happening through the combined efforts of all concerned parties. The AECB had no commitment then about radium in drinking water from the Serpent River.

QUESTION

7. Greenpeace Spokesperson

Greenpeace has advocated lowering the 50 mSv exposure limit for the worker. 50 mSv is too high, even 10 mSv is too high. British studies have shown genetic mutation and childhood leukaemia at even lower levels, but the Canadian government says no need to rush. When will they have action on limits?

PANEL

M. Duncan

The Gardener Report (British study) shows negative correlation from nuclear reactor release rates, but showed genetic effects for childhood leukaemia through parents. Similar studies have been initiated in Canada. There are no excess leukaemia cases in Canada. In the U.K. they are looking at other aspects.

The AECB is working on modifications on new regulations without any delays.

QUESTION

8. Andrew Oliver (Cameco, Blind River Refinery)

The film showed Uranium City houses boarded up, but the houses there have nothing to do with the effects of mining uranium. They were closed through market forces. Cement containers at the Cluff Lake mining site in northern Saskatchewan were shown as containing waste which was leaking. These containers did not hold waste, but an intermediary product for future processing. The containers are now empty. The experts used in the film, such

as Sister Rosalie Bertelli and a medical doctor from B.C. were both biased and poorly qualified as scientific advisors. Spilled water in northern Saskatchewan was near discharge levels for radioactivity.

PANEL

M. Isaacson

We interviewed and selected scientists who worked with the human side of the health issues.

I further doubt the peaceful use of nuclear energy, e.g., France, which makes bombs and tests in the ocean, and mines uranium in Canada. The U.S.A. uses Canadian depleted uranium for the production of nuclear weapons. Industry does its job but the AECB does not, and it has become part of the industry. Even the AECB has admitted, in a secret document to the Cabinet, that it does not have the resources to protect the public health.

M. Duncan

Depleted uranium shipped to the U.S. is used for aircraft control. We account for every gram of uranium shipped out of Canada. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitors the use of uranium for the AECB. We have the resources now to do a better job.

QUESTION

9. Floor

This debate and the film are detrimental to our community. The film makes it worse, while we are trying to advocate this community for Retirement Living. A balanced approach just like this debate is required. What the community needs now is assistance and not this film. To sink tax dollars into making this film was disgraceful.

10. Floor

The film depicted the true picture as she has seen it. Nobody is representing the Native people who have to live with the waste and its after-

effects. I am not a Native, but I wish I were. The Union man was doing a good job for some kind of campaign.

PANEL

E. Jaco

Our concerns are addressed correctly in this film.

QUESTION

11. Floor

Congratulations for bringing up the issues of the Native people and those of the children.

12. Cameco Representative

The mines in northern Saskatchewan have the safest radiation levels in the world. Mr. Seguin should know the facts before talking like an expert.

PANEL

H. Seguin

The mill at Key Lake had orange and yellow paint on equipment and support structure. Yellow colour in an uranium mill which produces yellow cake? When I visited the mill, the posted radon working levels were higher than those underground in Elliot Lake mines.

13. Cameco Representative

Radon levels were 0.02 to 0.04 WL on average. Occasionally some high values were encountered during maintenance which required the wearing of radiation masks.

14. Floor

We owe clean living to our Native people and our children.

15. Ed Burt (Farmer featured in the film)

I do not have much to say but if you can't believe a Roman Catholic nun then who can you believe? The lady from B.C.in the film told the truth. I do not believe the AECB when it says that Canadian uranium does not end up in

the making of atomic bombs. Contaminant uptake in vegetation, animals and fish is of concern to me as an organic farmer. We are all concerned for our survival. The AECB and control agencies are at the heart of all the problems. Spills in Elliot Lake and at the Blind River Refinery are of concern to me as I live downstream and downwind from these places. It is sad if there is a conspiracy in this room, which I suspect, with people's applause. The track record of the AECB is appalling.

16. Floor

Just a comment, I went to school here in Elliot Lake and with some Native people. With all the incidences of Oka this summer, I still feel that I really do not know the concerns of Native people. I would like to know more about the Native people and how life in Serpent River has changed since Elliot Lake.

CLOSING REMARKS

PANEL

E. Jaco

Life in the Serpent River Indian Reserve has changed considerably since Elliot Lake, especially in the hunting and fishing. Very few people take jobs and go outside the community. We like to keep our values, lifestyles, aspirations and language. We were denied these choices. Indian people have considerable land claims in the area, but now our activities are limited. We are charged for practicing our rights on our own land as was guaranteed in the treaty. The saddest thing for our people is alcohol, drug and sex abuse, because of these our way of life has changed. Come and ask us questions about who we are and what we want and together we can build a better tomorrow.

M. Duncan

The AECB wants to have feedback from all parties concerned and it will do all that is possible to improve regulations to benefit all equally.

H. Seguin

The film has brought some serious matters to our attention such as the Stanrock tailings. That kind of thing cannot happen again; it is only part of our overall offensive. The Federal Government is negligent in contributing to lay-offs in Elliot Lake and opening high grade mines in Saskatchewan. Do you know that some mines in Saskatchewan have 40% uranium and isolated pockets containing 1600 lbs of uranium per ton? The waste in Key Lake is of higher grade than the ore in Elliot Lake. We do not need Cigar Lake. The AECB did not have inspectors until 1975, but we started mining in the 1950's.

M. Isaacson

Uranium mining is just the front end. His concern is with the Native people as the mining affects our food chain. His Native people in Sweden have been devastated by the Chernobyl accident and their entire livelihood of reindeer has been contaminated. These concerns are for the Native people who have been much closer to the environment than the urban dweller.

Linda Hyle (National Film Board)

She thanked the audience on behalf of the National Film Board. Because of the current situation in Elliot Lake they were concerned about screening the film here. It was an opportunity to see through images how other Canadians were living. The film was controversial, and she will relate the comments raised here back to the National Film Board.